

FROM THE BOOKSHELF #161
LINDA CASHDAI

OCTOBER 5, 1976

"WHAT SHALL WE WEAR TO THIS PARTY?"
BY SLOAN WILSON

ANNCR: THE VOICE OF AMERICA BRINGS YOU ANOTHER IN THE WEEKLY SERIES, FROM THE BOOKSHELF.... IN WHICH WE REPORT ON BOOKS AMERICANS ARE READING. TODAY, WHAT SHALL WE WEAR TO THIS PARTY? BY SLOAN WILSON, PUBLISHED BY ARBOR HOUSE. HERE IS BOOK EDITOR _____ WITH LINDA CASHDAI'S REPORT:

EDITOR: TWENTY ONE YEARS AGO SLOAN WILSON WROTE THE MAN IN THE GRAY FLANNEL SUIT, A BEST-SELLING NOVEL ABOUT STATUS-CONSCIOUS AMERICAN CORPORATE EMPLOYEES OF THE 1950S, YOUNG BUSINESSMEN STRIVING CEASELESSLY TO CLIMB THE SOCIAL AND FINANCIAL LADDERS OF SUCCESS. THAT BOOK CREATED A NEW AMERICAN STEREOTYPE... UPWARDLY MOBILE, WORLD WAR TWO VETERANS FOR WHOM THE GRAY FLANNEL BUSINESS SUIT WAS A KIND OF UNIFORM.

NOW SLOAN WILSON HAS WRITTEN A NEW BOOK ABOUT THE SAME PEOPLE. BUT THIS TIME HE HAS WRITTEN AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY. "I AM A MEMBER OF THAT GREAT FRATERNITY OF MEN IN GRAY FLANNEL SUITS," SLOAN WILSON CONFESSES IN THE PREFACE TO WHAT SHALL WE WEAR TO THIS PARTY? HE GOES ON TO SPECIFY THE CRITERIA FOR MEMBERSHIP:

VOICE: "MOST WERE BORN LONG ENOUGH AGO TO RETAIN SOME MEMORY OF THE (ECONOMIC) DEPRESSION (OF THE NINETEEN THIRTIES).

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COLLEGE WAS A DIFFERENT EXPERIENCE FOR MEN IN GRAY FLANNEL SUITS THAN IT IS FOR YOUNGSTERS TODAY. FOR ONE THING, WE

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DID NOT HAVE GIRLS LIVING IN OUR DORMITORIES. GIRLS HAD TO BE SNEAKED INTO DORMITORIES. THAT MAY SEEM LIKE A SUPERFICIAL CHANGE, BUT ALMOST EVERYTHING ABOUT SEX IN THE YOUTH OF THE GRAY FLANNEL SUIT MEN WAS SNEAKY AND THAT'S A FACT WHICH LEFT MOST OF US FEELING GUILTY. / THEN OF COURSE, THERE WAS THE WAR -- WORLD WAR TWO. ALTHOUGH THAT GREAT STRUGGLE SEEMS ALMOST FORGOTTEN NOW, I THINK IT FAIR TO SAY THAT IT HAD THE MOST MASSIVE EFFECT ON MY WHOLE GENERATION, AN IMPACT WHICH DWARFS ANY OTHER EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE. ONCE THEY GOT INTO CIVILIAN LIFE, THE GRAY FLANNEL SUIT MEN DID NOT TAKE LONG VACATIONS. THE WAR LEFT THEM, I THINK, WITH A LUST FOR SECURITY, PERMANENCE, EVEN LUXURY AND PRESTIGE, ALTHOUGH THOSE ARE SUPPOSED TO BE BAD WORDS. MANY OF THEM PROGRESSED FAST IN BUSINESS LIFE. IT TOOK SOME TIME TO LEARN THAT CORPORATE ENDEAVOR IS UNLIKE A WAR IN AT LEAST ONE IMPORTANT RESPECT: THERE IS NO GREAT CAUSE, NO TITANIC STRUGGLE BETWEEN GOOD AND EVIL, NOTHING BUT A SCRAMBLE FOR THE BUCK (DOLLAR)."

EDITOR: SLOAN WILSON IS NOW IN HIS FIFTIES, AS ARE THE REST OF THE GRAY FLANNEL SUIT MEN. HE IS THE AUTHOR OF SEVEN BOOKS, THE FATHER OF FOUR CHILDREN, MARRIED FOR THE SECOND TIME, AND WEATHERED BY EXPERIENCES. HE IS A PERCEPTIVE MAN WITH A KEEN SENSE OF HUMOR. HIS AUTOBIOGRAPHY IS A CANDID PORTRAIT OF HIS GENERATION, AND A MOVING PERSONAL CHRONICLE.

WHEN WILSON LOOKS BACK AT HIMSELF -- THE SUCCESSFUL YOUNG AUTHOR OF THE BEST SELLER, THE MAN IN THE GRAY FLANNEL SUIT -- HE RECALLS, SEETHING BELOW THE SURFACE, TREMENDOUS

EDITOR: FEELINGS OF INSECURITY. "I'VE NEVER BEEN BITTER ABOUT
(CONT'D) THE SPECIAL PROBLEMS BROUGHT ON BY SUCCESS," HE WRITES,
"BECAUSE THEY, OF COURSE ARE EASIER TO BEAR THAN THE
PROBLEMS BROUGHT ON BY FAILURE!"

HE REMINDERS HOW HIS FIRST SUCCESSFUL NOVEL PRODUCED A
FEAR THAT IT MIGHT BE HIS ONLY NOVEL. HE TALKS, TOO,
ABOUT EMBARRASSING ASPECTS OF BEING A CELEBRITY. IN HIS

WORDS--

VOICE: "AT THE FESTIVITIES IN THE HOUSES OF FRIENDS I APPEARED
O TO BE BECOMING MORE OF A PERSONAGE AND LESS OF AN
P INDIVIDUAL. THE PEAK OF HYSTERIA ABOUT GRAY FLANNEL SUITS
T CAME WHEN MY ENTIRE CLASS AT HARVARD AGREED TO WEAR GRAY
FLANNEL SUITS TO OUR NEXT REUNION. THOUGH I KNEW THIS
WAS AN HONOR, OF SORTS, THE THOUGHT OF SOME TWELVE
HUNDRED MEMBERS OF THE HARVARD CLASS OF '44 MARCHING
ACROSS THE YARD, IN SERRIED RANKS OF GRAY FLANNEL
ABSOLUTELY FLABBERGASTED ME. THE VERY THOUGHT OF STANDING
UP ON SOME PLATFORM TO SAY: 'THANKS, FELLOWS' MADE ME
FLUSH WITH EMBARRASSMENT. FEELING CHURLISH, I DID NOT GO."

EDITOR: WILSON HAS AN UNUSUALLY GOOD MEMORY. HE RECALLS INTIMATE
DETAILS OF HIS YOUTH, BUT VIEWS THEM WITH A WISDOM THAT
COMES WITH MATURITY AND GROWTH. BUT THE BOOK'S REAL
STRENGTH LIES IN ITS UNIVERSALITY. THE UNIQUE PERCEPTIONS
-- AND MISCONCEPTIONS -- OF A YOUNGSTER...THE ADOLESCENT'S
NEED TO ASSERT HIMSELF...THE SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS OF TWO
YOUNG PEOPLE IN THE EARLY STAGES OF MARRIAGE...THE
INCREDIBLE EXHILARATION AT THE BIRTH OF THE FIRST CHILD...

EDITOR: THE COMPLEX EMOTIONS ACCOMPANYING THE DEATH OF A PARENT...
(CONT'D) THE AWARENESS THAT YOU ARE GROWING OLDER... AND WHILE
WHAT SHALL WE HEAR TO THIS PARTY IS THE PARTICULAR STORY
OF SLOAN WILSON'S LIFE, IT IS ALSO TO SOME DEGREE,
EVERYONE'S STORY AS SEEN THROUGH THE EYES OF A SENSITIVE
OBSERVER AND A POWERFUL WRITER.

ANNCR: YOU'VE BEEN LISTENING TO FROM THE BOOKSHELF. ANOTHER IN
THE SERIES OF VOA REPORTS ON BOOKS AMERICANS ARE READING.
JOIN US AGAIN NEXT _____ FOR ANOTHER SELECTION
FROM THE BOOKSHELF.

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